

The Basics; For Cats and Dogs, Life Is a Bowl Of
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What exactly are pet owners getting when they buy their pet food -- some \$16 billion worth each year in the United States?

That's a question many asked last week after the deaths of at least 14 cats and dogs and the recall of 60 million containers of pet food by Menu Foods of Canada.

The company produces 95 brands of pet food, including premium labels like Iams and private labels for Wal-Mart and others. On Friday, the New York State Department of Agriculture said it had found a toxic chemical used as rat poison in food linked to the pet deaths, though it did not explain how it got there.

The Week in Review asked Marion Nestle, a nutrition professor at New York University and the author of "What to Eat" (North Point Press; 2006), for insight. Ms. Nestle and Malden Nesheim, a professor emeritus of nutrition at Cornell University, are writing a book on the pet food industry to be published next year.

Q. How much is known about an industry that does business with the majority of 90 million cat owners and 74 million dog owners in this country?

A. It's an extremely secretive industry, more secretive than the food industry, from our experience. A lot of that has to do with animal research, and pressure from animal rights groups not to do research on cats and dogs.

Q. What research is done by these companies? After reports last month that its food was making pets ill, Menu Foods tested its product on animals, nine of which died.

A. It's usually taste preferences. A great deal of the industry's effort is making cats, for example, go for Product A instead of Product B. You cook up flavor additives -- a mixture of chemicals and food ingredients -- line up hungry cats, and that's basically the extent of the research. In addition to making sure the formulation supports growth of kittens and puppies.

Q. What's in pet food then? Is it regulated?

A. Pet food is regulated by the F.D.A. through the same state agencies that regulate food for farm animals. But product excluded from animal feed can go into pet food -- meat and bone meal, nervous system tissue -- parts of animals not allowed for anything else. There were cases of mad-cow disease in cats in England. The opportunity for cheap byproducts is much greater in pet foods. The assumption is that better brands don't do that, but it's not verified.

Q. If a few companies are making many of the brands, are pet foods all the same then?

A. Nutritionally, they have to meet the same industry standards, though they're priced very differently. You read the labels and they all look alike -- corn is the first ingredient in a lot of dry food.

Q. Why are some brands more expensive?

A. The quality of the ingredients. Are you using human-grade food or food that humans wouldn't care to eat? It doesn't matter to animals but it matters to the people who own them.

Q. What about health claims?

A. When you see food claims on breakfast cereal -- for instance, that it lowers cholesterol -- there has to be some scientific substantiation behind them. Pet foods have claims on them, that they support a healthy immune system, reduce risk of whatever, but they don't have to be supported by large amounts of science. They're worded in such a way that doesn't violate the F.D.A.'s labeling rules. I think the F.D.A. will have to take a much closer look at pet foods -- this is the second recall in a short time.

Q. What do cats and dogs enjoy eating?

A. Cats don't have a taste for sugar; they don't taste sweet things. They have a particular taste for what is referred to in the industry as "animal extract" -- God knows what's in it. Dogs can taste sweet, but, dogs will eat anything. Cats are very fussy, as any cat owner will tell you. The one thing that's never been studied is to find out how long it would take for a cat to eat something it doesn't like -- owners never wait it out. People are very attached to their pets, and it's painful to watch a cat not eat.

Q. Should owners prepare their own food for pets or feed them table scraps?

A. There's evidence that dogs can be fed table scraps and do quite well, provided they're healthy table scraps -- meat, dairy, vegetables, fruit. The problem is a lot of humans don't eat that way.